

Government of the District of Columbia



Child and Family Services Agency

Testimony of
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Director

Hearing
***“Agency Performance Oversight Hearing
on Fiscal Year 2009-2010”***

Committee on Human Services
Tommy Wells, Chair

March 11, 2010

John A. Wilson Building
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW | Room 500
Washington, DC 20510-6250
1 p.m.

Good afternoon, Chairman Wells and members of the District Council Committee on Human Services. I'm Dr. Roque Gerald, director of the DC Child and Family Services Agency. I'll provide a short overview of CFSA, briefly describe the current "State of the Agency" and our fiscal outlook, and then give detailed highlights of our performance in 2009.

Overview of CFSA

Child welfare is a critical public function that intervenes to protect children and youth from neglect and physical and sexual abuse. CFSA's Child Protective Services Administration is the gateway to child welfare, taking reports of alleged child abuse and neglect at the District's 24-hour hotline and moving out promptly to investigate and protect as necessary.

From that point, District child welfare is a public-private partnership. Both CFSA and private agencies provide:

- Community-based support that helps troubled families resolve issues while remaining together at home;
- Out-of-home care, which temporarily houses and nurtures children and youth who can't be safe at home; and
- Re-establishment of permanent homes for children and youth in care through safe return to their parents, guardianship (often with relatives), or adoption. Life-long connection to at least one stable, caring adult committed to providing a family-like relationship is a solution for older youth in care who would otherwise transition out of the system without permanence.

The Healthy Families/Thriving Communities Collaboratives throughout the city provide a host of neighborhood-based services, which assist many children and families at risk while preventing them from becoming involved with the child welfare system.

Our partnership with other child-serving agencies is an essential part of the safety net for District residents. The largest share of CFSA's budget goes to direct services, including contracts for management of about half the District child welfare caseload and for the array of services social workers use to help children, youth, and families overcome crises, heal, and improve their safety and well being.

CFSA is currently serving 4,096 District children and youth from infancy to age 21—49 percent at home and 51 percent in out-of-home care. All have experienced, or have been at high risk of, some form of neglect or abuse. Reflecting the trend of other urban child welfare agencies in the U.S., CFSA is presiding over a groundswell of youth, ages 13 to 21, growing up in care. Five years ago, older youth grew to half the foster care population, hit a peak of 62 percent in 2007, and are at 58 percent today. We project this trend will continue through 2014.

State of the Agency

I appreciate the opportunity today to update both this Committee and the community on how far CFSA has come during my tenure. As a strategic overview regarding the "State of the Agency," here are four highlights.

- **Agency Leadership:** In the past, high turnover at several levels and administrative weaknesses within CFSA were cause for concern. Today, the CFSA infrastructure is stronger than at any previous point in agency history. We are in the best position ever to administer our critical functions, perform at a high level, and make a positive difference to the District residents we serve. For over a year, we have maintained staffing of case-carrying social workers at 90 percent or more, which in turn keeps individual caseloads within national standards for optimum safety and quality. In 2009, I completed assembly of a highly competent executive team that provides both true leadership bench strength and the stability necessary for top performance. This team is proving effective in resolving long-standing issues in the administrative areas of Contracting & Procurement, contract monitoring, Human Resources, and Federal claiming. In addition, their expert oversight and focused attention on both internal and external direct services is empowering and motivating the next level of managers within CFSA and our private partners as never before, leading to better outcomes for children, youth, and families.
- **LaShawn:** As you know, Federal Court oversight of District child welfare continues. A brief status update is that we're awaiting a ruling on the District's motion of February 2009, asking Federal District Court to expedite a process to terminate court oversight. Meanwhile, we continue to work diligently to increase performance on mandated benchmarks. Beginning in 2008 and continuing in 2009, the city directly filed progress reports with the Court to complement the court-appointed monitor's regular evaluations.
- **Best Practices:** Nationally, child welfare is experiencing a period of transformation due to changes in family and child demographics, social issues, the economic climate, and evidence-based best practices stemming from comprehensive research. Along with others in the field, CFSA must stay abreast of these trends and retool as necessary to maintain efficiency and effectiveness.
- **Performance:** Finally, at the outcome level of performance, CFSA used the momentum that led to so many accomplishments in safety reform in 2008, as a springboard for forging ahead in other areas. In 2009, we further improved overall timeliness and quality of investigations while also achieving significant gains in permanence. At the process level, CFSA maintained or improved performance on a host of key indicators and initiated solid strategies where corrective action is needed.

Fiscal Outlook

Discussion at the spending pressure hearing February 19, left a misimpression with this Committee and the public that CFSA is facing a projected \$23 million spending pressure. This was speculation since the Chief Financial Officer (OCFO) had not yet released the FY10 First Quarter Financial Review Plan (FRP) for CFSA. When OCFO released the FRP on March 4, it showed CFSA is facing a spending pressure of \$15.1 million. I know that OCFO followed up with a briefing for you, and I also want to put certain facts on record here today.

The spending pressure consists of \$2.2 million in personal services and \$12.9 million in non-personal services. The personal services pressure is due primarily to (1) maintaining a vacancy

rate of 4.2%, which is below the budgeted vacancy rate of 6.8%, and (2) using overtime above the budgeted level. Please note two points.

- The low vacancy rate resulted from adding staff in Child Protective Services and over-staffing briefly to maintain adequate case coverage when we realized that many of our unlicensed social workers on probation would not pass the licensing exam as necessary to stay on board.
- The projected overtime spending pressure is relatively small and manageable. In fact, CFSA has taken aggressive steps to limit over-time and is now using it at a historically low rate.

The non-personal services spending pressure is due to spending in the agency's Object class 50 budget (Subsidies and Transfers) above the approved budget level. We are working with the Office of the City Administrator on a gap-closing plan scheduled for release April 1. It will include curtailing spending, restricting hiring, and re-analyzing projected costs after recent action to move all children in residential treatment into Medicaid-eligible facilities.

2009 Performance

Investigations: In 2009, CFSA built on safety reforms to improve timeliness and quality of child abuse/neglect investigations.

The strong focus on safety reforms in 2008 makes continuing improvements in Child Protective Services a good opening for our 2009 performance narrative. In 2009, CPS responded promptly to a continuing high volume of calls, kept the backlog of investigations started but not completed within 30 days low, and improved quality.

1. Performance Trend: Timeliness of Investigations							
Measure	Baseline: 9/30/07	↑	Dip: 9/30/08	↓	Recovery: 9/30/09	↑	Progress 12/31/09
Initiate investigations within 48 hours	72% (92%)*		69% (84%)		72% (89%)		75% (92%)
Complete investigations within 30 days	64%		20%		73% (90%)**		74% (91%)
Complete institutional investigations within 30-60 days	71%/100%***		40%/83%		100%/100%		100%/100%

* First number is investigations initiated; number in parentheses includes investigations initiated and attempted

** First number is investigations closed within 30 days; number in parentheses is investigations closed within 35 days

*** First number is investigations of foster homes closed within 30 days; second number is investigations of institutions closed within 60 days

2. Trend: Volume of Hotline Calls and Investigations			
	CY07	CY08	CY09
Hotline calls	7,435	11,445	11,041
Investigations opened	4,926	7,278	6,516

The hotline received an average of 620 calls a month in 2007, which jumped to 954 calls a month, on average, during the surge of 2008. In 2009, call volume did not drop back to pre-surge levels but continued at a rate of 920 a month, on average. In

2009, CPS opened an average of 543 new investigations a month, with actual numbers ranging from a high of 626 in April to a low of 404 in August.

Despite the continuing high call volume, CPS posted strong performance in responding promptly. Investigative social workers initiated 75 percent of investigations within 48 hours, with “initiation” meaning actually seeing and interviewing the alleged child victim. Adding attempts to initiate an investigation, meaning social workers diligently sought but could not connect with the child within 48 hours, CPS performance in responding promptly was 92 percent. While initiation and attempted initiation within 48 hours are what we track, I hasten to add that investigative social workers continue to seek every alleged child victim and do not close any investigation until they succeed.

Also, regardless of the heightened volume of investigations compared to past years, CPS kept the backlog in the range of 20 to 40, on average, throughout 2009. The rate of completing investigations within 30 days, as mandated by law, was 74 percent, and we completed 91 percent of all investigations within 35 days. This level is a measurable improvement over the 64 percent completion rate within 30 days of 2007, despite the higher volume of investigations in 2009. Changes in CPS structure, policies, and practices are all paying off. An example is the standard practice of supervisory review of investigations underway at the 18-day mark to remove barriers, provide extra support, and ensure safe and timely completion.

In addition, CPS instituted several practices to support improved quality. Among these are regular review of a sampling of hotline calls and Grand Rounds on open investigations. In 2009, we developed and provided training on a handbook for hotline workers and are now developing a similar guide for investigative social workers.

During the two historic snow storms last month, CFSA Child Protective Services remained open 24/7 as usual, taking and investigating reports of child abuse and neglect. Essential managers, supervisors, and social workers bunked at a hotel within walking distance of our headquarters to ensure continued operations, including during the two days that the District Government was closed.

Child Welfare Cases: In 2009, CFSA maintained or improved performance on a host of critical indicators and made significant progress in delivering positive outcomes.

In 2008, a pervasive belief was that CFSA’s agency-wide mobilization to reduce the backlog of investigations was having a widespread negative impact on performance. In fact, performance on several key indicators stayed steady, improved, or soared even as CFSA worked down a backlog of over 1,800 investigations in about five months. Today, I want to highlight six areas of continuing strong performance or improvement.

3. Performance Trend: Maintenance and Improvement					
Measure	9/30/07	9/30/08	9/30/09	12/31/09	Trend
Appropriate permanency goals	94%	94%	96%	96%	↗
Twice-monthly SW visits to children in out-of-home care	84% (89% one visit)	87% (91% one visit)	89% (92% one visit)	90% (93% one visit)	↗
Legal action to free children for adoption within 45 days of goal becoming adoption	32%	43%	71%	78%	↗
Children placed apart from siblings have twice-monthly visits	57% (69% one visit)	56% (64% one visit)	65% (80% one visit)	74% (84% one visit)	↗
88% of children in care eight days to 12 months have two or fewer placements	77%	78%	80%	79%	↗
No more than 82 children placed more than 100 miles from DC (kinship and pre-adoptive placements exempt)	145	114	95	87	↗

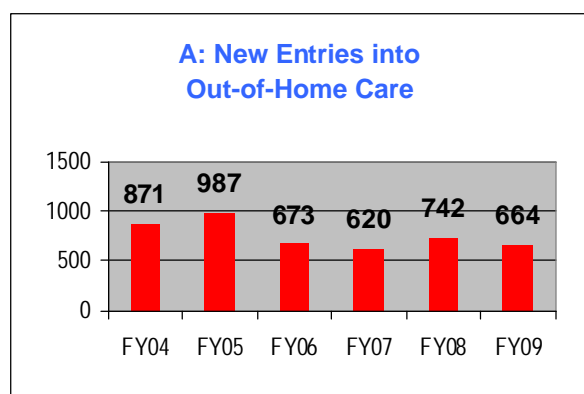
- For at least two years, the majority of children and youth in foster care have had an appropriate permanency goal—currently at 96 percent.
- Social workers are visiting 90 percent of children in out-of-home care twice a month, an improvement over the respectable level of 84 percent in 2007.
- Legal action to free children for adoption within 45 days of their goal becoming adoption has shown steady progress, more than doubling from 32 percent in 2007 to 78 percent today.
- Children placed apart from their siblings are seeing their siblings more regularly. Only 57 percent got together twice a month in 2007, but steady progress has brought performance to 74 percent today. Siblings visiting once a month steadily increased from 69 percent in 2007, to 84 percent at the end of 2009.
- In regard to placement stability, the goal is for 88 percent of children in care for at least eight days but no more than 12 months to have two or fewer placements. CFSA has steadily maintained performance in the 77-80 percent range for two years. We still need to improve but are closing in on the goal.
- And finally, the goal is for CFSA to place no more than 82 children more than 100 miles away from the District, not including kinship and pre-adoptive placements. This measure seeks to contain the number of youth in distant residential treatment, although near-by residential treatment options are limited. From 145 children in 2007, CFSA has only 87 in distant placements today. Three of these are older youth in college, who should also be excluded from this measure, bringing the actual number to 84.

In those areas where the all-out mobilization of 2008 did temporarily hinder performance, CFSA not only recovered in 2009 but often went on to new heights. Three measures help to illustrate that CFSA is once again stable, on track, and forging ahead.

4. Performance Trend: Recovery							
Measure	Baseline: 9/30/07	↗	Dip: 9/30/08	↘	Recovery: 9/30/09	↗	Progress/Maintenance: 12/31/09
Pre-placement health screening	79%		48%		92%		92%
Twice monthly SW visits to families at home	70% (79% one visit)		67 (74% one visit)		79% (84% one visit)		77% (84% one visit)
Weekly parent-child visit when goal is reunification	39% (70% monthly)		37% (63% monthly)		56% (79% monthly)		58% (82% monthly)

- In September 2007, 79 percent of children and youth received a health screening before entering placement. In September 2008, that number had declined to 48 percent. But by December 2009, CFSA performance recovered and improved so that 92 percent of children received a pre-placement health screening.
- Twice-monthly social worker visits to families served at home were at 70 percent in September 2007, dipped to 67 percent in September 2008, and forged ahead to 77 percent by December 2009.
- Weekly visits between parents and children with the goal of reunification were at 39 percent in September 2007, dropped to 37 percent in September 2008, and recovered to 58 percent by December 2009.

While performance on all these measures needs to improve, it is on track and trending in the right direction. Process measures weren't the only areas of improvement in 2009. Outcomes for children are also improving, and I'll highlight three examples.



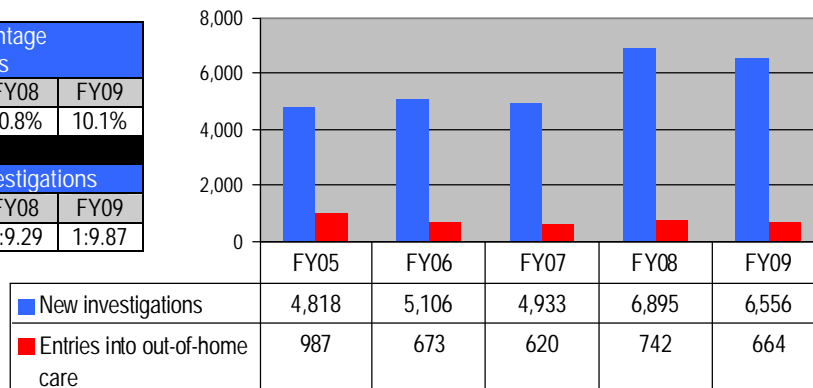
Entries of children and youth into foster care are declining (Figure A). This indicates increased ability to support families and keep children safe without having to resort to separation. When child entries into care are viewed in relation to new investigations, the decline is even more evident (Figure B). Over the past four years, CFSA has cut removals as a percentage of investigations by half—from 20.5 percent in FY07 to 10.1 percent in FY09. Even with the surge in calls and investigations in 2008, our removal rate in

relation to new investigations continued to drop. The very desirable outcome is helping families while also helping them stay together.

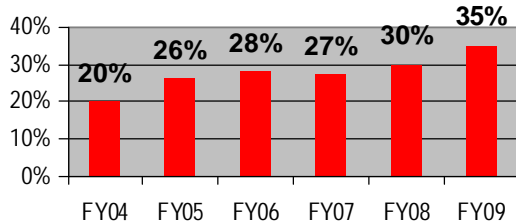
B: Child Removals in Relation to New Investigations

Removals as Percentage of Investigations				
FY05	FY06	FY07	FY08	FY09
20.5%	13.2%	12.6%	10.8%	10.1%

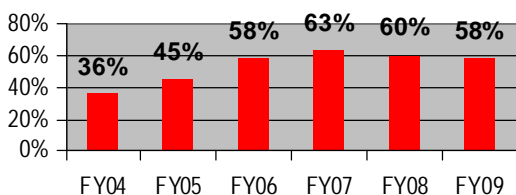
Ratio of Removals to Investigations				
FY05	FY06	FY07	FY08	FY09
1:4.88	1:7.59	1:7.96	1:9.29	1:9.87



C: Exits Within Nine Months of Entering Care



D: Children in Care for 24 Months or More



CFSA is steadily reducing length of stay in out-of-home care for children and youth entering now (Figure C). While we need to do much more, progress is trending in the right direction. In FY04, only 20 percent of children and youth left foster care within nine months. By FY09, we were achieving that desirable outcome for 35 percent.

Similarly, number of children lingering in foster care for two years or more is declining steadily (Figure D). This reverses a trend that peaked in 2007, when 63 percent of the District foster care population has been in care for at least two years. We reversed that trend in 2008 and continued the decline in 2009 to 58 percent despite the large population of older youth growing up in care for years.

We have much more to do to reduce time in care for all children, especially older youth—and we’ve made a start. As I reported at the Youth

Roundtable in January, we no longer automatically consign older youth to age out but now actively explore options for permanence for them. Future years will show the success of these efforts in measures such as declining length of stay in foster care.

And finally, **the outstanding outcome success story of 2009 is adoptions**. In the calendar year, CFSA and our private-provider partners exceeded the target of 125 with 130 adoptions.* This

* Includes 128 adoptions legally finalized in Family Court and two fully completed and signed adoption packages that CFSA forwarded for Family Court to finalize.

was a 27 percent increase in adoptions over 2008, which reversed a downward trend of four years. Finding adoptive homes for young people in foster care can be challenging because many are older or want to stay together with their brothers and sisters. Among young people adopted from the system in 2009 were 16 teens and 20 sibling groups—the highest numbers of children in these categories achieving adoption in several years. Our work also resulted in a record number of finalizations at the annual Adoption Day in Court during National Adoption Month last November. What’s more, the percentage of children achieving placement in a pre-adoptive home within nine months of their goal becoming adoption soared to a record level of 78 percent. This was a significant leap forward since just two years ago, our performance on this measure was only 21 percent. All told in 2009, 513 District children and youth exited the system for the best outcome of going home to their parents, entering legal guardianship (often with a relative), or becoming part of a forever family through adoption.

For children and youth with the goal of adoption, CFSA initiated the proven best practice of high-impact teams. One set of teams is composed of CFSA adoption specialists; another team is a public-private partnership between CFSA and local non-profit agency Adoptions Together. Our name for this strategy is the Permanency Opportunity Project—or POP. Three features characterize this flagship approach.

- It uses consistent and productive teaming at all levels—across systems, for the first time, through the public-private partnership and between social workers around individual cases. Family Court is also fully on board with us and is moving adoptions to finalization swiftly.
- This approach stimulates consideration of multiple pathways to permanence beginning from the moment a child or youth enters care. Along with making the placement, social workers immediately begin exploring how the child or youth can exit safely and swiftly.
- Finally, POP diligently uses new strategies to identify adoptive families for children and youth and to remove barriers so those in pre-adoptive homes can move to finalization promptly.

In 2009, POP reviewed and worked on a total of 260 cases of children and youth with the goal of adoption. They also began providing consultation and coaching around adoption to case-carrying social workers within CFSA and at our private agency partners. We plan to continue and expand this successful strategy with the goal of meeting a more challenging adoption target for 2010.

Corrective Action: CFSA continues working to improve placement stability for children and youth in care for more than 12 months.

While seeking permanence for every child and youth in care, we want their interim experience in out-of-home care to be both safe and nurturing. As I mentioned earlier, CFSA performance in providing placement stability for children and youth coming into care now has vastly improved. However, we continue to have ample room for improvement in maintaining placement stability for children and youth in care longer term.

5. Performance Trend: Placement Stability					
Measure	9/30/07	9/30/08	9/30/09	12/31/09	Trend
88% of children in care eight days to 12 months have two or fewer placements	77%	78%	80%	79%	↔
65% of children in care for 12-24 months have two or fewer placements	58%	53%	56%	56%	↔
50% of children in care for 24 months or more have two or fewer placements	46%	34%	30%	27%	↔

This is an important but intransigent area in need of improvement due to complex underlying issues that require systemic solutions. Describing the issues and what we're doing to meet them provides a glimpse into the scope of the challenges child welfare often faces.

Not all but many in long-term care are older District youth with needs far more complicated today than even a few years ago. In addition to personally experiencing abuse or neglect, far too many of these young people have grown up where drug use and domestic and gang violence are common. More than a few know someone who was murdered or even witnessed a murder. Some are involved in multiple systems such as mental health, juvenile justice, and special education. Tragically, we are seeing a slight increase in youth involved in prostitution. Placement instability comes from simply moving youth who present a complex set of issues rather than meeting their needs. In contrast, increasing placement stability depends on training and empowering social workers, foster parents, and other caregivers to work with these youth and supporting that work with a nuanced range of programs and other helping resources.

While there are no quick fixes, CFSA is using several sound strategies to stabilize placements. Among these are:

- Increasing support for social workers in managing issues rather than simply changing placements and collaborating with the Foster and Adoptive Parent Advocacy Center (FAPAC) to conduct joint trainings for foster parents and social workers;
- Collaborating with the DC Department of Mental Health to ensure capabilities of their Core Service Agencies and crisis intervention program are in line with the needs of children and youth in care;
- Using the contracting process to clarify expectations, raise standards, and stimulate expansion of services from child-placing and congregate care agencies;
- Restructuring our Placement Services Administration in preparation for tightening oversight of placement decisions throughout the system; and
- Developing or expanding placement resources specifically to serve teens in emergencies and children and youth who are medically fragile, developmentally delayed, deeply troubled, parenting, or lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning (LGBTQ).

2010: Going Forward

Looking forward, momentum and focus in equal measure characterize CFSA today, and we are on target to move forward in that spirit throughout 2010. High on our agenda is forging ahead with improvements in a host of areas that truly matter to children, youth, and families. As examples, I'll describe a few that we expect to have a far-reaching, positive impact.

- Practice Models make social worker-led teams the centerpiece of how we work with families at home and children and youth in out-of-home care. We're now in the second of three phases of training, which includes both classroom instruction and on-the-job coaching from national experts. Through this best practice, we expect to improve family engagement and empowerment, to broaden support for individual families and children within the system, and to produce better decisions throughout the life of each case.
- The Office of Youth Empowerment subsumes the former Office of Youth Development and Centers for the Keys for Life (CKL) program and offers an expanded array of services that youth in care deemed most important in a survey and listening tour. This is not just a name change but signifies a sea change in thought and action. The goal now is to seek legal permanence or life-long connections for youth regardless of age while simultaneously giving them the same quality of preparation for adulthood that those in intact families receive.
- Health screenings for children and youth before they enter out-of-home care now take place on site at CFSA. By bringing this function in-house three months ago, we expect to achieve reliable documentation of a high number of children and youth receiving this service as well as follow-up medical and dental exams within 14 days (previously 30 days). We also expect to collect comprehensive health history information as a basis for informing foster caregivers and developing sound medical records for children and youth in care.
- CFSA is spearheading action to bring the cutting-edge best practice of differential response to the District. With assistance from the National Resource Center and American Humane Association, we have conducted research on different approaches and initiated meetings with other District Government human services agencies to explore options.
- In my 17 months of leading CFSA, I've made proactive efforts to increase collaboration and transparency with key stakeholders including youth, providers, child advocates, Family Court, and other partners. I'm continuing that outreach, and CFSA is expanding on it through a complete redesign of our main agency website that will make it more user-friendly, especially to the public.

In closing, I sincerely thank District Council and the Committee on Human Services for legislative support around adoption, differential response, and guardianship subsidies. I appreciate your attention to my remarks today and will answer any questions you have.